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PROGRAMMES AND POLICIES OF THE INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION

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Summaries of presentations

Caribbean

Presenter: Mr. Jeremy McA. Collymore

Cooperation in disaster management: the Caribbean experience

This paper prepared for the World IDNDR Conference, Yokohama, Japan, provides an overview and review of the efforts of the English Speaking Caribbean to facilitate action in disaster preparedness and reduction.

The long regional tradition of cooperation in diverse areas of disaster management is emphasized. Consequently, the international community is reminded that the IDNDR must not be seen as the beginning and end of our efforts to reduce the loss of life and property.

In reviewing the status of disaster management in the Caribbean today, the diversity of regional entities is described and a call for a comprehensive regional focal point is being reiterated. The stated objectives of the IDNDR is the benchmark against which regional achievements are measured.

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Looking towards the future, the paper makes a strong call for an overhaul in the way in which the IDNDR is being promoted at both the international and national levels. It stresses the need for the blending of technologies and knowledge sources as an indispensable approach to the sustainability of any gains made during this era of international focus on disaster management.

Panel on Asia

Presenter: Mr. Cengiz Ertuna

A review of recent natural disasters in Asia

Natural disasters are estimated to have claimed about 3 million lives around the world in the past 25 years and the damage caused to property is assessed at about US$ 200 billion. Asia has been one of the most affected regions in the world: it is estimated that over 50 per cent of the world's major disasters occur in Asia. Since the International Decade on Natural Disaster Reduction began in 1990, the total number of deaths in Asia as a result of natural disasters has exceeded the 200,000 mark. The estimated total damage to property is about US$ 45 billion.

Floods, droughts, cyclones, storm surges, earthquakes, landslides and volcanic eruptions periodically affect a large number of countries in the region, causing great loss of life and extensive damage to property and infrastructure. In many coastal areas of Asia prone to damage by tropical cyclones and storm surges, the population is growing rapidly, together with the pace of economic development. Because of economic and population pressures, increasing numbers of people are living in volcanic danger zones. Large numbers of lives are lost owing to poorly designed and constructed dwellings in earthquake-prone areas.

The national economies of developing countries in Asia are significantly affected by the loss of scarce resources that could otherwise have been used for social and economic development. The impact of natural disasters is much higher in the developing countries in the region than in the developed countries and it is usually the poor who are most affected.

The most common of the water-related natural disasters in Asia are the floods. Almost all of the countries in Asia frequently experience severe flooding. Although floods today do not claim as many lives as storm surges, they affect both urban and rural residential areas, as well as agricultural areas and cause the greatest damage to property. In some ares, floods triggering landslides or mudflows claim significant numbers of lives. Floods are the most frequent and thus the most destructive natural hazard affecting the region.

Most of the great disasters associated with tropical cyclones have been caused by storm surges in Asia. Storm surges occurring several hours in advance of the landfall of a tropical cyclone can hit a coastal area while people are still being evacuated and can therefore cause extremely high loss of life and material damage.

Droughts may affect large parts of the population, causing human misery in the region, particularly if remedial measures are not taken in advance. Although droughts generally occur in semi-arid or desert climates in Asia, they may also severely affect areas where the average rainfall levels are reasonable.

The main geological hazards that affect Asia are the earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and landslides. The region covers many areas of high seismic activity and volcanism. It has been estimated that, during the past 300 years, over 2.5 million have died around the world as a result of earthquakes and that nearly 75 per cent of those fatalities occurred in Asia and the Western Pacific. Volcanic eruptions in large island countries of Asia located at the Western Pacific rim have also claimed considerable numbers of lives. Tsunamis are among other hazards that affect these countries.

Presenter: Ms. Corazon de Leon

Public information and the people factor in disaster reduction

The people themselves must assume a responsibility in disaster mitigation for sustainable development. This response from the people may, however, be expected only if they are aware and properly informed to be able to move them into the required action towards disaster mitigation for sustainable development.

The information programme aims to ensure safety of the people and to sustain life and property. It is expected that, fortified with relevant information, people's capability to respond quickly and appropriately to disasters will be increased, thus greatly reducing their vulnerability to disasters.

Three types of information have been identified towards disaster mitigation: (a) risks and hazards involved for each type of disaster; (b) appropriate behaviour/action expected of them thus increasing their preparedness in responding to disaster; and (c) resources at the family, community and national levels.

The information programme may be implemented at three levels. One is by working through credible people who could be influencers or communicators, who could assist in translating science and technology in a language and at a level people can understand. Another is through multi-media, who through realistic, pragmatic and responsible reporting, can influence people to take action and assist in resource identification and mobilization. The most direct approach is through interpersonal communication with the principal objectives of developing a firm resolve among the people to take action, increasing their capability to respond to crisis and decreasing their vulnerability from disaster. This may take the form of community assemblies, forums, dialogues and utilize three-dimensional mapping and visualization to help increase people's understanding and appreciation of the need to participate in disaster mitigation.

To ensure success of the information programme, policies supporting same should be formulated and translated into long-term action plans and short-term contingency plans. The preparedness plans, contingency plans and disaster mitigation plans could be integrated in the curriculum at all levels of the information programme.

These policies and plans are based on data gathered at the local levels. Through tools such as the geo information system (GIS), aggregation of data at high level and at larger scales will be made much easier and faster thus facilitating regional and global exchange monitoring and action.

Panel on Asia

Presenter: Mr. Shri K.B. Saxena

Critical policy commitments for the development of national action plans for south and south-east Asia

The Asian region faces the largest share of natural disasters. Governments have, therefore, over the years evolved and developed policy commitments to cope with them. The measures taken include integrating disaster concerns in development programmes, making use of science and technology, especially for forecasting and warning, and increasing preparedness and mitigation measures both structural and non-structural. Regional cooperation in some fields through bilateral and multilateral arrangements has also been taking place. Reducing the impact of natural disasters has, however, been limited, and can be attributed to: (a) gaps in linkages between natural disaster reduction and development; (b) inadequate preparedness particularly at the cutting edge level; (c) lack of sensitivity on differential vulnerability; and (d) inability to view community as a focal point of effective response.

The positive action to bridge these gaps lies in the renewal of policy commitment, allocation of adequate resources, institutional capacity-building, training, education and orientation for seeking community involvement.

The issue that needs to be addressed must be a review of existing mechanisms for establishing linkages between natural disaster reduction and development programmes and to reorient them by:

(a) Building up an institutional mechanism within the structure of planning and implementation of development programmes;

(b) Taking up disaster reduction projects in critically identifiable areas;

(c) Promoting community capability to countervail against dilution of commitment;

(d) Strengthening mechanisms for the enforcement of regulatory provisions.

The building up of national capability would require (a) revamping of existing institutional arrangements and legal support systems; (b) preparing contingency action plans at the national, sub-national and community levels, in addition to those for specific projects and high risk areas such as megacities near the coast; (c) adequate resource allocation on a regular basis to agencies involved in disaster reduction and management; (d) improved vulnerability analysis and accurate risk assessment; and (e) strengthening forecasting, warning and monitoring systems.

The Asian region also has the largest number of poor, socially disadvantaged groups. The need, therefore, for dovetailing differential vulnerability into programmes of disaster reduction and development should assume high priority. This could be achieved through:

(a) Identification of such groups;

(b) Integrating measures for reducing their vulnerability in various programmes;

(c) Prescriptions for disaster reduction consistent with survival of these groups;

(d) Sharply focused poverty alleviation programmes;

(e) Building of awareness through the efforts of Governments and non-governmental organizations.

The Asian region has some of the oldest civilizations, where the community has a strong presence and has built up resilience against natural disasters. This is an asset which needs to be reinforced by recognizing the community as a unit of development planning and as a critical level for decision-making, taking up programmes promoting community efforts, sharing knowledge concerning traditional disaster management practices and fostering equitable distribution of benefits while promoting community solidarity.